

University of Tribal Art.

Universalite de l'art tribal.

by Werner Muensterberger

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Werner Muensterberger is emeritus professor of psychiatry (ethno-psychiatry) at the State University of New York and has a distinguished career behind him, including ethnopschoanalytic fieldwork in Indonesia. He has written several books and a number of papers dealing with ethnographic art, an interest he has held since the nineteen twenties. This current work, designed for an innocent audience, presents photographs of 34 artefacts from the collections held at the Barbier Müller Museum in Geneva, together with an accompanying essay.

In this book Muensterberger endeavours to bring the inexperienced audience into more than just a passing contact with ethnographic art. The photographs by Perre-Alain Ferrazzini and the explanatory paragraphs are both clear and concise, and achieve this aim. The New Ireland *kulap* limestone figure (p. 93), for example, is accompanied by a brief text together with a print of one of the few extant sketches of *kulap* figures in an internal display house. A similar treatment is given to all the artefacts presented, and they range from a prehistoric Mississippian mask through to a number of ethnographic pieces from West Africa, insular Southeast Asia and Oceania.

Muensterberger's essay is less successful. Here he grapples with the problem of wresting "meaning" from ethnographic art objects. He uses this approach as part of a technique designed to introduce ethnographic art at a more comprehensive level.

Getting beyond the initial reactions of bemusement or intrigue is always difficult for the Westerner when confronting ethnographic art, and the quest for "meaning" is never far from mind. Often, a few comforta-

ble ideas are digested and the artefact is neatly labelled as a native god, or an ancestor figure, a fetish, sorcerer's charm, or a heathen idol. These ideas originated in the early days of mission contact and have been perpetuated by an endless series of art auction catalogues.

In an attempt to "get behind the various forms and styles and focus on fundamental currents" (p. 5), Muensterberger follows Panofsky's (1939) identification of a class of primary or natural meanings comprising both factual and expressional content. He then gives a brief exegesis of a myth relating to the invention of masking from the Bakongo in Zaire. Rather than the deep structural analysis we have come to expect from myth analysts since Levi-Strauss made his mark, Muensterberger reinterpretes the surface elements in a psychoanalytic vein, elaborating on supposed expressional meaning. He tries to emphasize the experiential facets of masking traditions, yet assumes the masks out of context in an oddly naive way, and dismisses emic traditions as "a rigid determinism as spelled out by the tribal lore" (p. 9). It appears that Muensterberger in recent years has not strayed far from the security of the psychoanalytic couch.

After several curious errors of fact, such as: "We [Europeans] have no history of tribal art" (p. 7), Muensterberger comes to the core of his argument when he notes that the early modern artists in the Western tradition were strongly influenced by ethnographic and prehistoric artists. "If these people [modern European artists] had found the key with which to unlock access to a new pictorial grammar they gave primary evidence of the universal connotations of the arts of the "sav-

ages"[these art objects] now became allegorical expressions for the unity of mankind." (p. 16, p.30 in the French). Muensterberger preceded Rubin *et al.* (1984) in this recognition, but does not succeed in giving a convincing argument for "universality of primary meanings".

From his essay, it would appear that questions relating to meaning, universality, and ethnographic art seem to coil up and die the moment they are put to the floor. Possibly the reason for this sudden death lies with the framework Muensterberger has used to view ethnographic art. Concepts developed from within a European cultural milieu generally assume a self-contained standard system of symbol referents in an art tradition. This approach does not travel well. For anthropological field work Victor Turner distinguished three levels or fields of meaning of a symbol:

1. the level of indigenous interpretation (exegetical meaning), including semantic referents as well as myth.
2. the operational meaning derived from observing a symbolic element in a series of interactions.
3. the positional meaning derived from analysis of relationships between symbols.

(derived from Turner 1967, 1969)

Turner's fields of categorization offer far more potential than those Panofsky offered. Primarily, Turner's levels establish the crucial emic/etic opposition necessary to cope with the interrelations between symbols without having to step into very illusive territory. This then led to a more coherent approach to the intercultural interpretation of symbol systems.

To get beyond Western belief systems entails shifting the point of reference from

the author and placing it with traditional artists. These artists continue to work in an unbroken line of descent from their pre-contact traditions.

In many traditional societies, art objects are primarily vehicles for the tenets of traditional law, land ownership, social organization and other basic principles of social structure. These societies almost invariably have a non-literate background. In order to transfer crucial aspects of their social structure, ritual action is embodied around the production or curation of sculpture.

Art can act either as focus for ritualized behaviour by assembling a transitional framework of communication. In other cases it can act as a legal charter, validating change. These art works are directly equivalent to signs of authority in our societies. Here lies the universality that Muensterberger was seeking.

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